

Anniversary

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At 10:54, a lone figure entered Harborside Park. Seeming unconcerned with the possibility of a mugging, the man strode purposefully down a little-used path to a bench set by a clump of bushes and a birdfeeder carved to resemble a Japanese pagoda. There was no one else in sight, no one else in the park, as far as he could tell, and he preferred it that way. No one else would understand.

At precisely 11:04, a second figure joined him on the bench. The smaller and younger of the two had a head of brown curls that swept across his collar; the larger had short-cropped hair receding in a widow's peak. Both were blue-eyed, one ocean-dark, the other sky-bright. They studied each other for a moment before the smaller spoke.

"Hey, Jim. It's good to see you."

The larger man smiled. "You, too, Chief. You look good."

"Thanks. Are you--you know--okay?"

"I'm fine, Sandburg. Don't worry. You been keeping busy?"

A grin. "You know me, man. Non-stop, no matter what. What've you been up to?"

"The usual. I keep an eye on things."

"Still protecting the tribe, huh? Guess some things never change."

Quietly. "Everything changes. I just wish I could do more."

"Come on, Jim. How much more could you possibly do?"

—

Blair crouched behind Jim, trying to peer around the bigger man's shoulder. It was too dark; he couldn't see a thing beyond the bushes. Jim shoved him back.

—

—

_"I said stay _down_, Sandburg!"_

—

"Where are they, Jim?"

"I'm not sure."

—

_"_What_"_"_

—

"I can't focus. There's something--interfering somehow, like that white noise generator Brackett used."

"Use your sight, man. Or your sense of smell."

"You don't get it. Whatever this is, it's blocking everything. Sight, hearing, smell--it's like my sentinel abilities are gone."

—

The big man shrugged and didn't answer. The smaller heaved a sigh, but made no more attempts at persuasion. Experience had taught him when to back off. After a time, the older man spoke again.

"So, have you given any thought to the dissertation?"

"Yeah. But I still don't know."

"I think it should be published."

"Are you sure, Jim? It could cause problems."

"You deserve the recognition."

"I don't care about that. Where I am--it just doesn't matter."

"It matters to me. You spent a long time working on it. Years before you met me. The results should be out there, so other people know how hard you worked, how much--how much you helped me. It was your life's work, Chief. And it might help other sentinels and their partners."

"You really feel that strongly about it?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Okay, then. I guess--I guess it should be published."

The big man smiled. "Good."

—

"Did you call for backup?"

—

—

"Yeah. Simon said they'd be here in ten minutes." Blair set his hand on Jim's shoulder. "Listen, man, whatever this is, you can get around it. We figured out how to get around the white noise _generators; this should be the same. You just have to snake all your senses around it."_

—

"There's no time for that."

Blair pushed his hair back, thinking. "Okay. Okay, then we'll concentrate on one sense. Hearing."

"Sandburg--"

—

_"Come on, Jim! You already know how to do this. Whatever this thing is, it can't be everywhere. You just need to find out where it _isn't._ You can do this, man. Trust me."_

—

Jim shook his head. 'Find out where it isn't.' Right.

—

— —

The answering smile was almost shy. "Thanks, Jim."

"I'll do the thanking around here, Chief. Sometimes, I don't know how you ever put up with me."

"Are you kidding, man? You're my best friend."

The big man snorted. "Some friend. I yelled at you, pushed you around, blamed you for things that weren't your fault--I even kicked you out of the loft once."

"Yeah, you were a pain in the ass," the smaller man agreed with a grin. "But you also stuck by me if I was in trouble, worried about me if I was hurting, took me to Jags games, taught me to flyfish. Oh yeah, and you saved my life a few dozen times. But I don't suppose any of that registers on the Jim Ellison Friend-O-Meter."

"The what?"

"Gimme a break, man, they can't all be good."

The older man shook his head, refusing to be distracted. "It wasn't enough, Chief."

"Yes, it was. It was way more than I ever got from anyone else."

"But not as much as you deserved."

Giving vent to a frustrated growl, the younger man slumped down on the bench, sticking his legs straight out in front of him, head tilted back to gaze at the stars. "Do me a favor, okay, Jim? Let the guilt go."

"I'm trying, Chief." He sighed, imitating his friend's posture. "I'm trying."

"Well, try harder."

—

"This isn't working."

—

"You're trying too hard. Relax, Jim. Do your breathing."

Jim closed his eyes and breathed deeply, leaning his back against the base of a pagoda-shaped birdfeeder. Under Blair's hand, the muscles relaxed just a fraction, and he prayed that it would be enough, that he was on the right track. Jim trusted him to be right. He looked around, trying to be Jim's eyes, but it was still too dark to see anything.

"I think--I think I hear something."

—

_Yes! Blair's fist pumped the air. _ _"Great, man. Now don't tense up. Don't force it, just let it come."_

—

Oh, God. Jim's eyes snapped open. "Sandburg, get down!"

—
— —
"Fill me in, Chief. What have you been doing?"

"There's not much to tell, Jim."

But there was always something to tell. Hands caressing the air, the younger man talked of new sights and old, changes and memories, things lost and gained. Now and then, the older supplied a few words, a few sights and memories of his own, but he was generally content to watch and listen to the younger, a gentle, fond smile gracing his face. The younger watched him in turn, expressions chasing themselves across his countenance. Occasionally, he glimpsed something in the azure eyes that made him anxious, but he tried to cover the feeling with livelier chatter, tried to banish it with an amusing anecdote. Through it all, his own gaze held equal fondness, inextinguishable by time or circumstance.

Eventually, the stories wound down, and with them, the smaller man's enthusiasm. They sat quietly, enjoying each other's company, but the silence didn't last. There was too little time to waste. Even a moment was too much.

"I can't believe it's been a year already, Jim. I just--I don't seem to notice the passage of time anymore."

"Yeah. Me, too."

"How are you really, Jim?"

"Fine. A little lonely, but it's okay. You?"

"I'm good, man. I'm good."

—
Shots came out of the dark. He saw the sparks, and he felt the impact when the bullets struck his body, and it hurt--God, it hurt! He turned instinctively to his partner, saw the blood--so much _blood--and cried out at nightmare come true, the dreaded, the unthinkable. He grabbed on, held on, holding in life, but the darkness was advancing and it tore him away, tore them apart and flung them down into nothing._

— —
— —
Sky met ocean. "Truth, Sandburg."

"That is the truth." A sigh escaped him. "Mostly. It's--hard, sometimes. Everything's so different, so strange. It's not what I envisioned, you know?"

"Yeah. I know."

"I can't get used to--being without you."

"I miss you, too, Chief. We've got to give it time. It's only been a year."

Brown curls curtailed his face. "Doesn't matter. I'll never stop missing you, Jim. I don't--I don't want to stop."

The big man frowned. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

The smaller man stiffened in alarm, reaching a hand that didn't quite touch. "Don't say that! I need this, Jim. Even if it's only once a year, I need it. I'll always need it. Please, man, promise me you'll be here next year."

"Okay," he soothed. "Okay, I'm sorry. I promise, I'll be here for as long as you need me."

"That's forever, Jim. Can you handle that?"

"Yeah, partner." The big man smiled. "Yeah, I can handle that."

The sky betrayed them with light. Regretfully, he gave voice to what they both knew. "Time to go."

"Already?"

They rose together, and stood for a moment in awkward silence, until the younger spoke once more.

"Jim, can you--can we--?"

Strong arms enfolded him in answer. The smaller man flung his arms around the solid body, holding on tight. His eyes closed briefly, then opened again, unwilling to miss even a second. Tears trembled in his voice.

"It isn't fair, Jim."

"I know. But it could be worse."

"How?"

"It could've been you."

The reply was muffled against a wool-clad shoulder. "I wish it had been."

The big man gripped his friend's arms and pushed him away, shaking him. "Don't ever think that! Not ever, you hear me, Sandburg?"

"I hear you."

"You'd better. I'm keeping an eye on you. If I have to, I'll come back here and kick your ass."

A grin. "You won't have to."

"Promise."

"Yeah." The big man pulled him close again, and he clung on as though to let go would send him plunging in a thousand-foot drop.

"Jim?"

"What?"

"I love you."

Gently, the big man released his hold, pulling back. He laid one hand on the smaller man's cheek, the other lightly clasping his arm. "I love you, too, Blair."

"I wish I could have said that--before."

"You didn't have to, partner. You showed me." A sharp sliver of sun cut through the horizon. "I've gotta go. See you next year, Chief."

"Yeah. See you, Jim."

The big man stepped back, out of reach. He smiled, and was gone. The smaller crouched down and passed a hand through the grass in front of the pagoda-shaped birdfeeder. Salt tears escaped the ocean of his eyes.

"I'll be here, Jim. Every year, I promise. No matter what."

The young man straightened, cast a lingering glance at the patch of grass he had touched, and walked away through the park, alone as he had come.

End
file.